
CHAPTER SEVEN

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts

7.00

APPOINTMENT AND COMPOSITION OF THE COMMITTEE

The Standing Orders of the Legislature provide for the appointment of an all-party Standing Committee on Public Accounts for each session of the Legislature.

The membership of the Committee is approximately proportional to the respective party membership in the Legislature. All members are entitled to vote on motions with the exception of the Chair, whose vote is restricted to the breaking of a tie.

In accordance with the Standing Orders, a Standing Committee on Public Accounts was appointed on May 4, 1998, soon after the commencement of the Second Session of the Thirty-sixth Parliament. The membership of the Committee at June 25, 1998 when the House adjourned for the summer recess was as follows:

Bernard Grandmaître, Chair, Liberal
Richard Patten, Vice-Chair, Liberal
Marcel Beaubien, Progressive Conservative
Bill Grimmett, Progressive Conservative
Jean-Marc Lalonde, Liberal
Shelley Martel, New Democrat
Peter L. Preston, Progressive Conservative
Joseph N. Tascona, Progressive Conservative
Terence H. Young, Progressive Conservative

ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee examines, assesses and reports to the Legislature on a number of issues, including the economy and efficiency of government operations; the effectiveness of programs in achieving their objectives; controls over assets, expenditures, and the assessment and collection of revenues; and the reliability and appropriateness of information in the Public Accounts.

In fulfilling this role, the Committee reviews and reports to the Legislature its observations, opinions and recommendations on selected matters in the Annual Report of the Provincial Auditor and the Public Accounts. These documents are deemed to have been permanently referred to the Committee as they become available.

PROVINCIAL AUDITOR'S ROLE IN THE PROCESS

The Provincial Auditor assists the Committee by providing appropriate audit information for use by the Committee in its scrutiny of government programs and financial activities.

Additionally, the Provincial Auditor and senior staff attend committee meetings during the Committee's review of the Annual Report of the Provincial Auditor and the Public Accounts and assist the Committee in planning its agenda.

COMMITTEE PROCEDURES AND OPERATIONS

GENERAL

The Committee meets on Thursday mornings when the Legislature is sitting. At times, the Committee also meets during the summer and winter when the Legislature is not sitting. All meetings are open to the public with the exception of those dealing with the setting of the Committee's agenda and the preparation of committee reports.

At meetings dealing with ministry operations, the deputy minister, usually accompanied by senior ministry officials, answers questions raised by committee members. Since the Committee is concerned with administrative rather than policy matters, ministers rarely attend. When the Committee is reviewing Crown agencies, the chief executive officer, usually accompanied by senior agency staff and, at times, the chair of the board, attend the meetings.

MEETINGS HELD

From October 1997 to September 1998, the Committee met regularly on its designated meeting day when the Legislature was sitting. The Committee's work during this period included:

- reviewing the following subjects from the Provincial Auditor's *1997 Annual Report*:
 - Ministry of the Attorney General — Courts Administration Program
 - Ministry of Community and Social Services — Transfer Payment Agency Accountability and Governance
 - Ministry of Education and Training — Ontario Student Assistance Program
 - Ministry of the Environment — Conservation and Prevention Division
 - Ministry of Finance — 1996/97 Public Accounts of the Province
 - Ministry of Health — Public Health Activity
 - Ministry of Transportation — Commercial Vehicle Safety and Regulation
 - Management Board Secretariat — Central Collection Services;
- discussing Bill 74, *An Act to amend the Audit Act*, which would permit the Provincial Auditor to present to the Speaker up to three additional reports per year, in addition to the Annual Report; and
- organizing the Committee's agenda.

REQUESTS FOR SPECIAL AUDITS

On June 4, 1998, the Committee passed the following motion under section 17 of the *Audit Act*:

That the Standing Committee on Public Accounts resolve that the Provincial Auditor provide a report to the Committee on the compensation provided to those affected by the ice storm of 1998 in Eastern Ontario.

The Office of the Provincial Auditor has commenced its review of the compensation procedures. At the conclusion of our review, a report will be made to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

COMMITTEE PROCEDURES

The Committee conducts hearings and then reports its comments and recommendations to the Legislature. Committee procedures include the following:

- in-depth briefings and preparation;
- when practical, the inclusion of ministry responses in committee reports; and
- follow-up of committee recommendations.

The Committee also follows up in writing with those ministries and Crown agencies not selected for detailed review by the Committee regarding their plans and timetables for addressing the concerns raised in the Provincial Auditor's *Annual Report*. This process enables each auditee to update the Committee on activities since the completion of the audit, such as any initiatives taken to address the Provincial Auditor's recommendations.

REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE

GENERAL

The Committee issues its reports to the Legislature. These reports contain a précis of the information reviewed by the Committee during its meetings, together with comments and recommendations.

All committee reports are available through the Clerk of the Committee, thus affording public access to full details of committee deliberations.

A report to the Legislature covering the Committee's 1997/98 activities has been prepared.

FOLLOW-UP OF RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE

The Clerk of the Committee is responsible for following up on the actions taken by ministries or agencies on the Committee's recommendations. The Office of the Provincial Auditor confers with the Clerk to ascertain the status of the recommendations and, if considered necessary, brings any significant matters in the Provincial Auditor's *Annual Report* to the attention of the Legislature.

STATUS OF COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION RESPECTING AMENDMENTS TO THE AUDIT ACT

Detailed information on this subject and other related matters is contained in Chapter Two of this Report.

OTHER COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

CANADIAN COUNCIL OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEES (CCPAC)

The Council consists of delegates of federal, provincial and territorial public accounts committees from across Canada. The Council meets at the same time and place as the annual Council of Legislative Auditors (COLA) to discuss issues of current interest. The nineteenth annual meeting of the Council was held in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, from August 16 to 18, 1998. The annual CCPAC and COLA meetings also permit the delegations to participate in a joint session to discuss subjects of mutual interest to politicians and legislative auditors. The 1998 joint session with COLA was on the subject of *Governments Moving into the Third Millennium*.

The Vice-Chair and the Clerk of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts represented the province at this year's meeting.